

Folic Acid Now: Before You Know You're Pregnant

The first moment you look into your baby's eyes, you will probably feel both love and fear for your new responsibility. It is one of the strongest instincts of life, to protect your baby. But you don't have to wait until you see your baby for the first time. You can start taking care of your baby today. Even before you're pregnant.



The U.S. Public Health Service recommends that all women who could become pregnant get 400 micrograms (0.4 mg) of folic acid every day. This could prevent up to 70 percent of some types of serious birth defects. But to do this, women need folic acid a month before they get pregnant through the first few weeks the baby is growing. That's why you should always get enough folic acid everyday . . . even if you're not planning a baby until next month, next year, or later.

Why Folic Acid Is So Important

Folic acid is a B-vitamin that can be found in some enriched foods and in vitamin pills. If women have enough of it in their bodies before pregnancy, this vitamin can prevent birth defects of the baby's brain or spine. Spina bifida, a birth defect of the spine, can cause paralysis of the lower body, with no control of bowel or bladder, and learning disabilities. Another type of birth defect affects the brain and causes babies to die within a few days.

But now the message about these birth defects is one of hope – many of them can be prevented if women get enough folic acid every day. Folic acid can help form a baby's brain and spine. Getting enough takes a small effort. But it makes a big difference.

Eat Right...

Most of us get some folic acid in our diet every day. Folic acid has been added to some foods such as enriched breads, pastas, rice and cereals. Check the labels on your breakfast cereals; a few have 100 percent of the folic acid you need. A well-balanced diet with fruits and vegetables is always important. You can get your folic acid through food alone, but it takes careful planning to make sure you get enough every day.

...And Take A Vitamin



For many women, an easy way to be sure you're getting enough folic acid is to take a vitamin with folic acid in it. Almost every multivitamin you can buy has all the folic acid you need. If you get an upset stomach from multivitamins, try taking them with meals or just before bed. You can also buy vitamin pills made with only folic acid—they are small and easy to swallow.

Even If You're Not Planning to Have a Baby Yet

No one expects an unplanned pregnancy. But they happen—every day. In fact, about half of all pregnancies are not planned. That's why you should get enough folic acid every day if there's any chance you could get pregnant. Because by the time you know you're pregnant, your baby's brain and spine are already formed.

For More Information

If you'd like more information on folic acid, or if you have questions, contact us at 1-888-232-6789. You can visit the web site at www.cdc.gov/nceh/prevent/flo. Or, ask your own doctor, pharmacist, nurse, or dietitian for more information. But don't wait until you're pregnant. Your baby needs you now—before you know it.

Order# 099-6069

March 1999 CDC-NCEH99-0240